



WORLD WOMEN

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New talent in the broadcast booth

by Lucas Aykroyd | 17 DEC 2021



TSN's Kenzie Lalonde broadcast 13 games at her first IIHF Ice Hockey Women's World Championship in Calgary.

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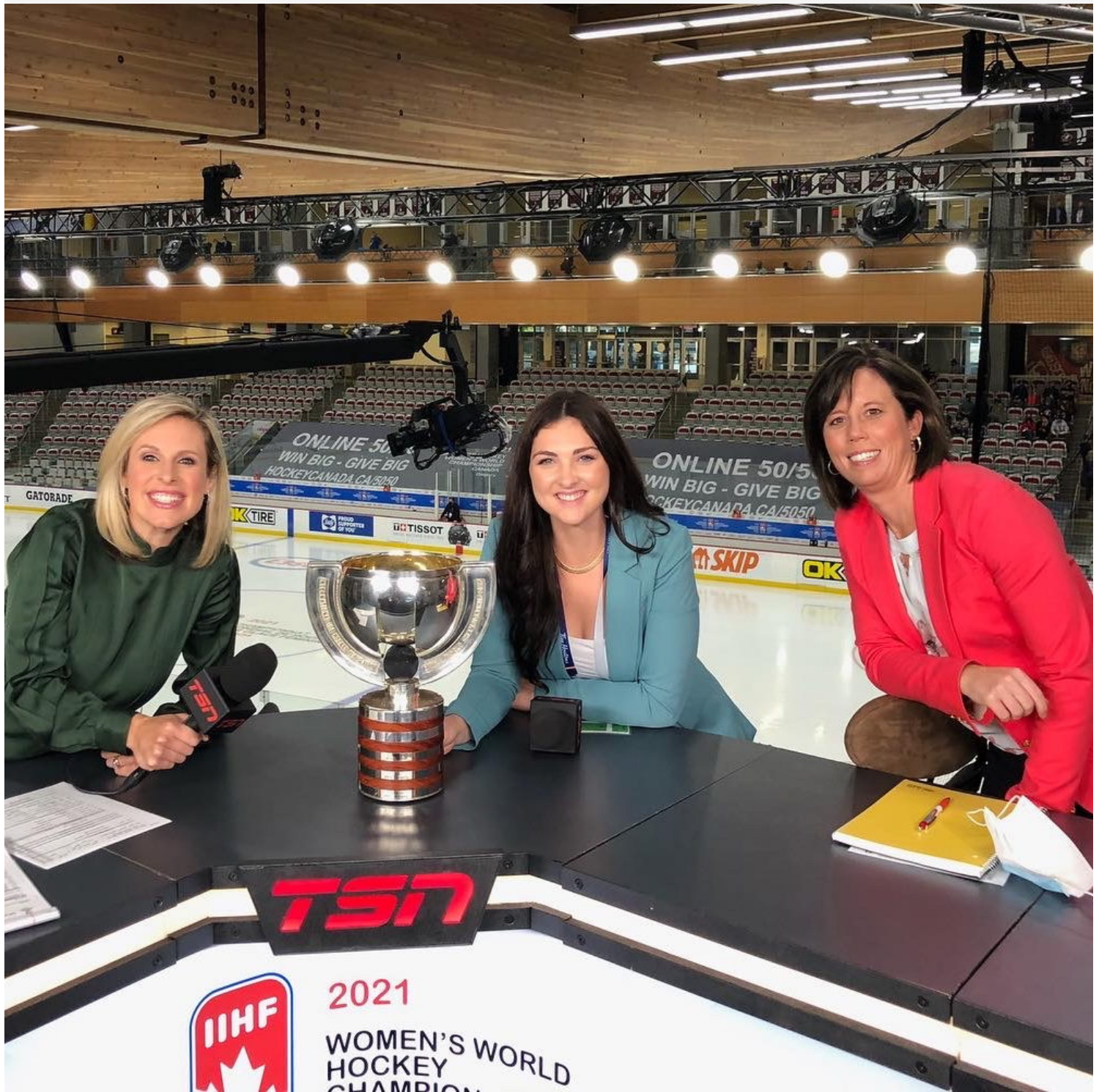
Growing up in the Ottawa area, Kenzie Lalonde was a big fan of Senators enforcer Brian McGrattan. Stars like Daniel Alfredsson and Mike Fisher had their appeal too, but for Lalonde, McGrattan stood out in specific ways.

"I admired his ability to fight and his mohawk," confessed the 27-year-old Canadian broadcaster, who's now



2017.

None of this necessarily portended a future for Lalonde as a pioneering play-by-play announcer. Yet the widespread consensus among viewers was that the Stittsville, Ontario native did a bang-up job in her TSN debut at the 2021 IIHF Ice Hockey Women's World Championship in August.



TSN's Kenzie Lalonde (centre) with Tessa Bonhomme (left) and Carla MacLeod (right) at the 2021 Women's Worlds in Calgary.



Group B teams. The newcomer from Eastlink Community TV partnered successfully with colour commentator Carla MacLeod, a 2006 and 2010 Olympic gold medalist on defence with Team Canada. Throughout, Lalonde's preparation, professionalism, and powerful delivery were on display, ramping up the excitement of the first Women's Worlds since 2019.

"This was really my first chance to call international women's hockey," said Lalonde, who became the first woman to broadcast a televised QMJHL game on 14 March when the Charlottetown Islanders defeated the Halifax Mooseheads 6-4. "I've primarily done junior stuff and men's sports. I've gotten a taste of some female sports. But, hello! I grew up playing hockey, right? I was never good enough to make an Olympic team, so I wiggled my way in doing commentary. It was a dream to call the best of the best in the world."

Unsurprisingly, the traditional TSN tandem of Rod Black and Cheryl Pounder covered the gold medal game, where Canada ousted the five-time defending champion Americans and broke a nine-year drought with captain Marie-Philip Poulin's spectacular 3-2 overtime winner. (Black and TSN parted ways in October.)



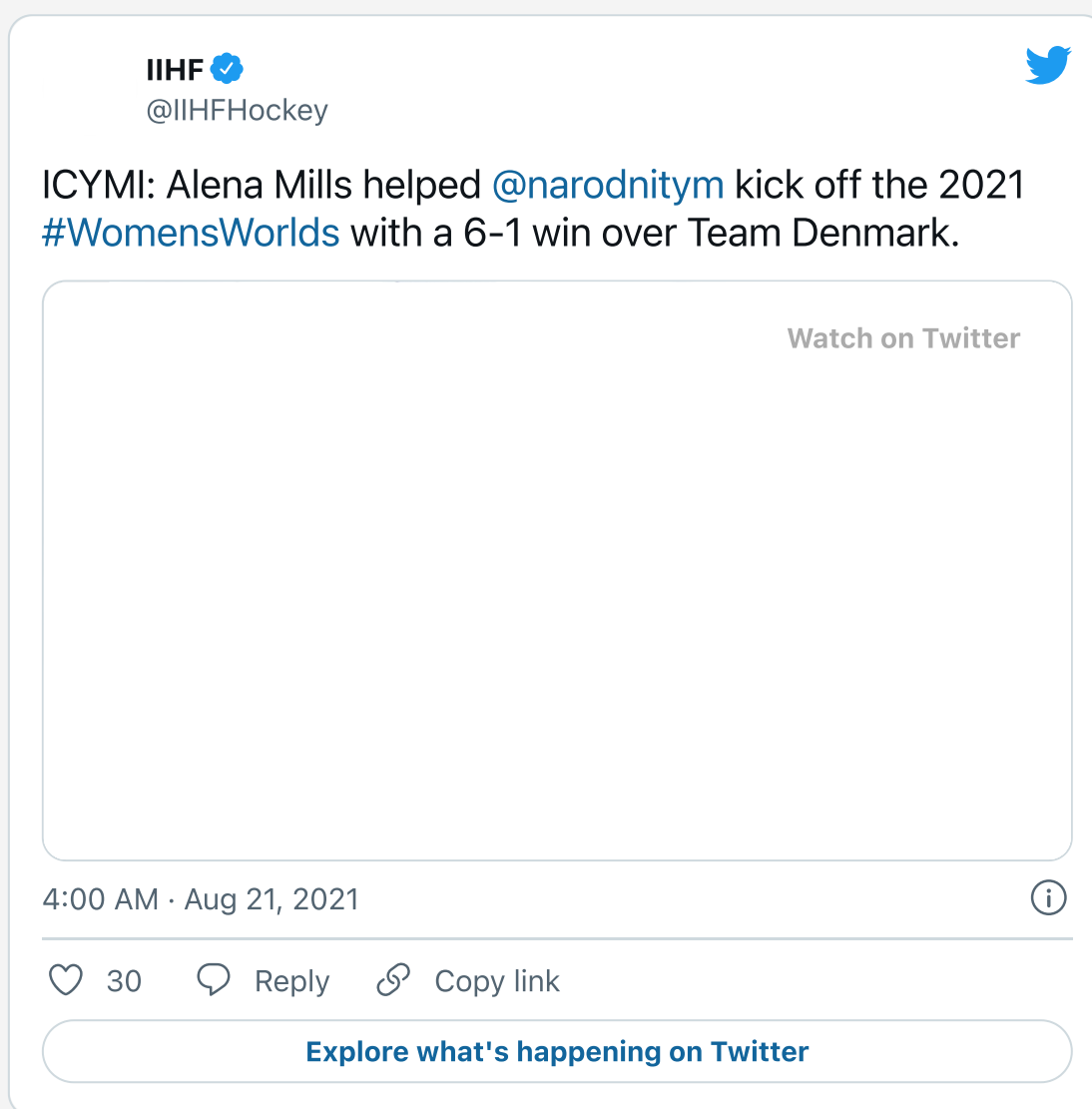
Kenzie Lalonde made history when she broadcast a QMJHL game on TV with colour commentator Logan Delaney on 14 March 2021.

Lalonde had no complaints. When she received a phone call a few weeks earlier from Paul Graham, TSN's longtime vice-president, she was thrilled to accept his invitation to enter the tournament pandemic bubble.



Short notice equalled a steep learning curve, especially in terms of pronouncing European and Asian player names correctly.

“When I got connected with producer Sam Cicirello, I immediately sent him a message: ‘How soon can I get my hands on a pronunciation guide?’” Lalonde recalled with a laugh. “I also started researching the players and coaches. Luckily, I have friends that have worked in international hockey before, like Dan Robertson, who does the Habs play-by-play for TSN 690 and worked at Eastlink as well. We had a good chat about stuff like pronouncing Czech names. TSN provided me with lots of background information. They’re the best in the business. When I flew to Calgary, I spent the entire five and a half hour flight studying the names and numbers until we got there and got the full IIHF roster information.”



Her first broadcast was the 2021 Women’s Worlds opener on 20 August, with the Czech Republic hammering Denmark 6-1 on captain Alena Mills’ hat trick. Long three-game days were the tournament norm, an oh-so-



On Lalonde's first trip to Alberta's biggest city, there was no chance to visit the Calgary Tower or Glenbow Museum. Rigorous quarantining, masking, testing, and social distancing rules applied. Downtime consisted of playing cornhole with beer and snacks. To stay safely inside the bubble, it was strictly back and forth between the host hotel and WinSport Arena.

"I probably woke up every morning at 6 am and spent least an hour getting my notes prepared," Lalonde said. "We'd get in the vehicles and head to the rink for 8:30 or 10:30 – usually arriving about an hour and a half or two hours before the first game. Carla and I would meet with the coaches to chat about past games and get more details on them to help share their stories. Then we'd brew coffee in the volunteers' room, get to the booth, and go over our notes. After broadcasting the game, I'd do some interviews for the Group A teams. For instance, I might talk to coach Troy Ryan before a Canada game, or do post-game interviews with Canadian or Finnish players for social media or for SportsCentre to clip off. And so on. You'd end up at the rink from 8 am to 11 pm."

She admired TSN host Tessa Bonhomme ("I think she's the best at what she does") and Pounder ("She has the most incredible eye for the game, and her chemistry with Rod was so fun to watch"). However, she naturally forged her tightest bond with MacLeod.





Broadcaster Kenzie Lalonde (right) partnered with colour commentator Carla MacLeod, a two-time Olympic champion, at the 2021 Women's Worlds.

“Carla is an incredible coach,” Lalonde said of the 2007 Women’s Worlds gold medalist and newly minted coach of the University of Calgary Dinos. “I admire the way she analyzes a game in terms of coaching tactics. On air, a lot of times, I’d, say, ask her, ‘Carla, it’s a 5-on-3. How would you handle this?’ I gained a lot of respect for her and what she’s accomplished over the years. Look at her relationship with Japan. I think her stepping into that program as a coach in 2012 gave it life and rebooted it. She was a big catalyst for the Japanese team we saw in Calgary, from their structured warm-ups to their ability to take the puck to the net.”

Lalonde relished watching Group B talents like forward Akane Shiga, whose wicked shot gave Japan its first two goals ever versus the U.S., and German captain Julia Zorn, whose hard-working, playmaking style reminded her of how she liked to play herself. Lalonde also helped out IIHF.com social media guru Storie Serres, conducting sit-down chats with Germany’s Tabea Botthof and the Czech Republic’s Katerina Mrazova.

Making the call as underdogs made history was particularly gratifying.



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“The Switzerland-ROC team quarter-final was insane the way it went to overtime [in a 3-2 Swiss comeback victory],” Lalonde said. “Having Laura Zimmermann get that goal in her first Worlds as an 18-year-old, that’s a call you don’t forget, and I was excited to be part of that. And how about that Hungarian team? Lisa Haley was the only female coach at the tournament, and she and her players made history just by being there. Captain Fanni Gasparics was a really fun player to watch for them – such a smooth skater with good finesse.”

Hockey is a small world. As a teenage forward with the Ottawa Lady Senators, Lalonde played against current Team Canada stars like Erin Ambrose (Toronto Aeros) and Sarah Nurse (Stoney Creek Sabres). Her coach was former 21-season NHL D-man Luke Richardson, who helped the Montreal Canadiens reach the 2021 Stanley Cup finals as an assistant coach. In Calgary, Lalonde was tickled to cross paths with one of her Lady Senators role models.

“Jamie Lee Rattray was a few years ahead of me. She was someone we all looked up to who made the national team. When I saw her at the tournament, it was like, ‘Wow, I have a chance to work with TSN, and you’re on the ice with Team Canada!’ So we both had a good giggle about that. And she had an incredible tournament, with three of her four goals coming against the Americans. She showed she not only knew how to fulfill her role as the 13th forward, but could also be an impact player.”

In the broadcast booth, Lalonde is poised to become an impact player herself. She learned a lot over the years from listening to commentators like IIHF Hall of Famer Gord Miller and TSN 1200’s Dean Brown. “As a kid, every morning I’d eat my Froot Loops and watch SportsCentre with Holly Horton,” she noted.

She also admires Leah Hextall, whom ESPN recently hired for 2021-22 as their first full-time female NHL announcer. However, Lalonde gives the lion’s share of credit for her play-by-play skills to former Eastlink



Kenzie Lalonde (left of mascot Spartacat) enjoys a childhood day out organized by the NHL's Ottawa Senators.

This 1994-born girl's love of hockey was sparked early on. Both her father and her older brother played the sport. By age three, she was skating and playing ringette. She started hockey at four.



That was our yearly tradition. I did the Rink of Dreams at what's now known as the Canadian Tire Centre – all those monumental moments you have as an Ottawa minor hockey player. In Stittsville, I grew up playing boys, but I switched over to girls' hockey at the atom [10 and under] level, since women's hockey was already pretty well-developed around Ottawa.”

With the Lady Senators, Lalonde's teammates included future Boston University captain Rebecca Leslie and goalie Amanda Leveille, who'd win three NCAA titles with the University of Minnesota. However, Lalonde was struggling with hockey burnout circa 2012. The Sacred Heart Catholic High School student's university path – to say nothing of her broadcasting future – wasn't entirely clear.

“Everyone was committing to Cornell and Harvard and Quinnipiac and all these amazing schools, and I didn't know what I wanted to do yet,” Lalonde admitted. “I was considering just not playing and starting a new chapter in my life, seeing what else I had to offer and what else interested me.”





After playing her minor hockey in the Ottawa area, Kenzie Lalonde captained the Mount Allison University women's hockey team in Sackville, New Brunswick.

She talked with Sacred Heart student teacher Andrea Switalski, a former Mount Allison hockey star, about finding a balance between education, a social life, and sports. It motivated Lalonde to give the New Brunswick school a shot.

Her five years there rekindled her love for hockey and spawned new friendships. The Mounties made a run for the Atlantic University Sports (AUS) championship in her second year, despite falling short in the finals against Moncton.

While completing her bachelor of commerce degree, the 171-cm, 66-kg forward led the Mounties in goal-scoring in 2015. She served as captain her last two years.

“I think I really influenced people through my dance moves and post-game celebrations,” Lalonde joked. “We were big fans of Avril Lavigne’s ‘Sk8ter Boi.’”

Simultaneously, Lalonde sowed the seeds for her media career. She’d considered pursuing a master’s degree in sport management, but the dream of going on-air just wouldn’t die. She hosted athlete interviews on the Mount Allison YouTube channel and volunteered with Eastlink. Post-graduation, she landed a job in 2017 as a social media host with U Sports, the national governing body of Canadian university sports, back in Ottawa.



After Eastlink offered her a job in Halifax in 2019, she covered sports as diverse as basketball, tennis, figure skating, and soccer, interviewing athletes from all walks of life in the Maritimes. Yet the company specifically encouraged her to seek out hockey play-by-play opportunities. Lalonde finally took the plunge on 9 March 2019 – the day after International Women’s Day – when the Truro Bearcats took on the Amherst Ramblers. It was the first time the Maritime Junior Hockey League (Junior A) had a woman doing play-by-play. The trend here is obvious.

“I think it’s exciting because viewers want to see more female representation,” Lalonde said. “Fans are ready for it. Hopefully we’ll see more women do it because the opportunities are there. It’s so fun, and it’s up to organizations to start making room for women in sport. I’m trying to help any young woman who’s interested in play-by-play. Talk to me! We can explore options and try to find a role for you somewhere. Reaching out to local junior teams and creating your own opportunities and getting some reps, that’s always my number one piece of advice.”





Kenzie Lalonde (centre) stands next to Rod Black, Carla MacLeod, Cheryl Pounder, and Tessa Bonhomme (L to R) at the 2021 IIHF Ice Hockey Women's World Championship in Calgary, Alberta.

She'd love to broadcast more IIHF women's hockey and ideally call a dramatic highlight like Poulin's 2014 Olympic golden goal versus the U.S. in Sochi. Doing NHL play-by-play is another major goal of hers. If it involves the Senators, so much the better. For the time being, she came back behind the TSN mike for Rivalry Series games between Canada and the U.S. and the PWHPA's Secret Dream Gap Tour.

Kenzie Lalonde may not be dropping the gloves the way Brian McGrattan did. But with her open-minded, relentless approach, she's battling her way toward the top of the broadcasting world.

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